CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Paul Auster was born on 3 February 1947 in Newark, New Jersey, the son of Samuel and Queenie Auster. After attending school in Maplewood, New Jersey, he studied English and comparative literature at Columbia College, graduating with a B.A. in 1969 and an M.A. in 1970, after a fragmentary career that saw him travel to Europe, quit, and then reenroll. Auster traveled to France in 1971 with his girlfriend, writer Lydia Davis. They returned to the States and were married in 1974. In 1978 they separated, and they divorced in 1982, the year he married his current wife, novelist Siri Hustvedt.

Career

The formative influence of the years in France can be seen not only in Auster’s translations of French poets like Stéphane Mallarmé and Jacques Dupin but also in Auster’s novels. He describes in the 1997 memoir Hand to Mouth how he existed on the edge of poverty in France, eking out a living doing translations and tutoring while writing poetry and essays. Poverty’s effect on the creative individual is an important theme in novels such as The New York Trilogy and Moon Palace.

Perhaps the most influential event, however, is the death of Auster’s father on 15 January 1979. Auster began The Invention of Solitude immediately after Sam’s death. In it he introduces many of the ideas that have become familiar in his novels and movies—mortality, the difficulty of knowing another person, the
importance of chance, father-son relationships—and uses Sam as the central “character.” In the book’s second part Auster also quotes liberally from philosophical and literary antecedents, starting a trend for allusiveness that has continued throughout his career. As *The Invention of Solitude* demonstrates, major influences include Samuel Beckett, Franz Kafka, the Bible, philosophers such as Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz, Jewish writers such as Edmond Jabès, and Freudian psychoanalysis. In later works Auster openly references his nineteenth-century American antecedents, particularly Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Allan Poe, and Henry David Thoreau. This combination of European and American influences gives Auster’s work its unique flavor, at once inward-looking, speculating on the big mysteries of personal existence, and expansive, engaging with America’s grand foundational myths.

In 2007 Paul Auster turned sixty. The preceding years had witnessed a significant raising of his international profile. In the December 2005 edition of *Esquire* magazine, celebrity fans and friends of Paul Auster, including actor Harvey Keitel and musician David Byrne, offered their fond opinions of the man and his work. A year later Auster was awarded the prestigious Prince of Asturias Prize for Literature. Given his current popular and academic appeal and his status as “a literary giant,” it may be surprising to learn that the manuscript for *City of Glass*, the first part of *The New York Trilogy*, was rejected by seventeen publishers between 1982 and 1984.

Auster had been busy as a writer long before then, however. Throughout the 1970s he wrote plays and published five poetry collections. He even produced a conventional detective novel called *Squeeze Play* in 1978, which did not find a publisher until 1982 and therefore failed to help achieve its author’s ambition “to turn it into cash and pay off as many bills as I could.”
Since the publication of the trilogy Auster has had fewer problems paying the bills. He has published fourteen novels, three memoirs, several collections of essays, translations of French poetry, and four screenplays. Translated into thirty languages, Auster’s work has sold consistently well in Europe. In France, in particular, he has achieved iconic status and sustains an intellectual industry all his own. For example, 1996 saw the publication of four French scholarly texts devoted entirely to *Moon Palace*.4

Although the novels have garnered the majority of scholarly attention, it may well be the movies, particularly *Smoke* (1995) and *Blue in the Face* (1995), that have cemented Auster’s reputation as a significant cultural figure in the United States, not simply a purveyor of belles lettres. Not only do these movies offer a beguiling portrait of a Brooklyn populated by eccentric individuals, but their collaborative nature has promoted an image of Auster as metropolitan and sophisticated, yet generous and open-minded. In short, the Auster who wrote the screenplay for *Smoke*, codirected its ramshackle sequel with Wayne Wang, and elicited inspired, improvised performances from everyday Brooklyn citizens and stars such as Lou Reed, is generally considered “cool.” Despite declaring in 1994 that he had no desire to direct again, Auster has since gone on to write and direct *Lulu on the Bridge* (1998), a love story centered around a mysterious stone with magical properties, and *The Inner Life of Martin Frost* (2007), the plot of which first appeared in *The Book of Illusions* (2002).5

Overview

The movies are significant not only for the celebrity status they have conferred upon Auster but also because they constitute a distillation of his main preoccupations in a medium accessible to a wider audience. These concerns, despite his experimentation
with a wide variety of media as well as literary forms, have re-
ained remarkably consistent, from the pithy, enigmatic, and
somewhat difficult poetry of his early career, to the apparently
more open, inclusive, and optimistic imaginings of Smoke, Blue
in the Face, Timbuktu (1999), and The Brooklyn Follies (2005).

A useful starting point is Auster’s analysis of Smoke’s title:
“Smoke is something that is never fixed, that is constantly chang-
ing shape. In the same way that the characters in the film keep
changing as their lives intersect. Smoke signals . . . smoke screens
. . . smoke drifting through the air. In small ways and large ways,
each character is continually changed by the other characters
around him” (3F 16). Clearly Smoke is primarily about human
relationships and the mutability of the individual within social
interactions. While “smoke screens” connotes deception, the
difficulty of perception, and the invisible barriers we throw up
between ourselves and others, the phrase “smoke signals” re-
affirms the primacy of communication, even if that communica-
tion might at times seem to be in code. At heart the message here
is similar to E. M. Forster’s famous formulation: “Live in frag-
ments no longer. Only connect.”6 The means of connection may
be obscured, but nonetheless the need remains.

If Forster’s statement implies, in addition to its ethical impera-
tive, despair at humankind’s inability to connect, then Auster’s
work makes this a constant. A typical Auster protagonist is male,
a storyteller, and, for a variety of reasons, in a state of isolation
from his loved ones and wider society. This isolation is often self-
enforced, and although not all the characters’ attempts are suc-
cessful, the narrative of an Auster text tends to describe their
attempt to break free of this enervating isolation and find rein-
vigoration in relationships with others. Paul Benjamin, the pro-
tagonist of Smoke, has lost his wife and unborn child in a random
shooting incident outside the neighborhood cigar shop that forms the central location of the story. Suffering from writer’s block, and with his professional solitude amplified by personal suffering, Paul lives in self-imposed exile in his apartment. He only begins an at times painful rehabilitation when he meets young runaway Rashid Cole and becomes involved in the attempt to reunite Rashid with his estranged father.

Another crucial figure is Auggie Wren, proprietor of the cigar shop. Through his conversations with Auggie, and through close scrutiny of the photographs Auggie has taken of the shop every day since stealing his first camera, Paul learns to pay attention to Brooklyn itself as a possible balm for his emotional wounds. Part of Auster’s intention in scripting the movie was to “work against some of the stereotypes that people carry around about this place [New York City, and Brooklyn in particular].” Of his neighborhood, Park Slope, he says, “It has to be one of the most democratic and tolerant places on the planet. Everyone lives there, every race and religion and economic class, and everyone pretty much gets along. Given the climate in the country today, I would say that qualifies as a miracle” (3F 18). Whether or not this is romanticization, it is evident that geographic and demographic factors participate in the escape from isolation almost as much as the formation of individual friendships. This is particularly true of *The Brooklyn Follies*, in which Brooklyn helps cure the narrator of his misanthropy.

One has to be careful when studying Auster’s work to distinguish between isolation—an essentially uncreative and solipsistic state of withdrawal from contact—and solitude. The latter condition, specifically the “productive kind of solitude, the solitude of a vicar or an artist,” enables a sympathetic outlook from the individual through immersion in the lives of others.7 While
acknowledging the paradoxical nature of this idea, Auster, in an interview with Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory, attempts to explain it: “You don’t begin to understand your connection to others until you are alone. And the more intensely you are alone, the more deeply you plunge into a state of solitude, the more deeply you feel that connection.” Ultimately, he continues, “it isn’t possible for a person to isolate himself from other people. No matter how apart you might find yourself in a physical sense . . . you discover that you are inhabited by others.” In another important paradox, Auster stresses that “your language, your memories, even your sense of isolation—every thought in your head has been born from your connection with others.”

The question is whether a particular character is inclined to accept this fact or hide from it.

Art, particularly writing, has an important role to play. To write literature and to read a book require a person to enter into dialogue with others. Despite their both being solitary acts in the physical sense, Auster stresses that ethically and psychologically, reading and writing are collective endeavors: “It’s the only time we really go into the mind of a stranger, and we find our common humanity doing this. So the book doesn’t only belong to the writer, it belongs to the reader as well, and then together you make it what it is.”

This is why so many of his novels portray writers or people who, sometimes inadvertently, become writers by changing their attitudes to language. For Auster, the precise point at which an individual begins to think and feel artistically—that is, to break free of an outlook in which precedence is given to sense perceptions or factual knowledge—is the point at which he or she becomes truly human. There are numerous examples throughout his work. Most influential is *The Invention of Solitude* (1982).
Inspired by the death of his father, the book is divided into two distinct parts. In the first section, called “Portrait of an Invisible Man,” Auster reflects in the first person on his bereavement and attempts to piece together an accurate portrait of Sam from memories, photographs, possessions, and newspaper clippings. That he fails to do this is testament both to the coldness and reticence of his father and to the futility of biographical investigation itself. In recognizing that “the essence of this project is failure,” Auster comes to regard his father as emblematic of one’s inability really to “know” another person.10

A possible solution is explored in part two, “The Book of Memory.” Here Auster is reconfigured as “A.” and writes in the third person, at one remove from himself. Rather than biography, what is attempted here is an extended, more abstract meditation on memory, authorship, and fatherhood, one that includes a wealth of quotations from literary antecedents such as Friedrich Hölderlin and Anne Frank. Auster explains, “I wanted it to be a collective work. . . . These are the voices that I live with and I wanted them to come out and share the work with me.”11 Drawing on literature—allowing the writing itself to become more literary, ambiguous, and dialogic—enables Auster to come closer to an understanding of human experience based not on factual or material evidence, but rather on a communal sharing of ideas. “Truth” lies somewhere among the various voices.

Time and again in Auster’s novels one sees this transition from fact to fictionalization, from documentary to art. For instance, Blue, the protagonist of Ghosts (1986)—the second part of The New York Trilogy—has been accustomed to writing reports that “stick to outward facts.” Yet the protracted observation of his mysterious quarry, Black, renders such reports increasingly problematic, until he realizes that “words do not necessarily work.”
At this point his reports are transformed into speculative works of fiction. Through this fictionalization he achieves a clearer understanding of his situation.

Blue’s realization is crucial to understanding Auster’s entire oeuvre. Far from being an unequivocally liberating or reassuring experience, the shift into a more literary mode depends on accepting that all language misbehaves: it is subjective, endlessly nuanced, open to interpretation, and, to quote one of Auster’s major influences, Ralph Waldo Emerson, “vehicular and transitive.” To put it another way, before one can fix a word to an object or person, its meaning shifts. For human beings who crave control and security, such a concept can rock the very foundations of existence, because one must understand that the inability to know another person, or indeed the world in general, is for Auster bound up in this slipperiness of language. It is a constitutive paradox of his work: artistic expression, which is necessary because language cannot be tied to a documentary recording of the world, ends up talking about its own inadequacy to express the world. Most of Auster’s early poetry wrestles with this paradox: “if we speak of the world it is only to leave the world.”

Later, in Moon Palace (1989), Marco Stanley Fogg attempts to describe his surroundings to his blind employer, Thomas Effing. The difficulty this task poses leads Fogg to muse philosophically on language’s relationship to perception. “What do you see?” he asks. “And if you see, how do you put it into words? The world enters us through our eyes, but we cannot make sense of it until it descends into our mouths. I began to appreciate how great that distance was.” Eventually he appreciates that “the more air I left around a thing, the happier the results, for that allowed Effing to do the crucial work on his own . . . to feel his own mind traveling toward the thing I was describing for him.” Once again, then, meaning is not objective. It stems from a tacit contract
between individuals and is produced in the space between their subjective interpretations.

The evacuation of objectivity from language has important consequences for “reality.” If one cannot state with any confidence what is objectively real, can reality be said to exist? And if reality ceases to exist, is all that remains at best subjective, at worst a total fiction? This has significant implications for Auster’s work, both thematically and formally. First, the recession of reality only increases the importance of stories. With objective reality unavailable, stories become the primary means of conveying truths of an altogether more psychological, emotional, and, ultimately, profound nature. Viewed negatively, this can of course lead to imprisonment in a world of words, with no escape to reality.

Alternatively, if one welcomes other people’s narratives, then a kind of democracy of storytelling ensues. This is best illustrated by the National Story Project, which Auster edited and published as I Thought My Father Was God, and Other True Tales of American Life from NPR’s National Story Project (2001). Assuming a single, knowable reality to be unavailable, the best approach is to build reality collectively, as an exercise in storytelling. As Auster expresses it, “People would be exploring their own lives and experiences, but at the same time they would be part of a collective effort, something bigger than just themselves. With their help, I said, I was hoping to put together an archive of facts, a museum of American reality.”\textsuperscript{16} Any “facts” are of course open to interpretation, but the relationships between the stories create communal truths that are more accurate representations of our experience as social beings.

Formally Auster employs several characteristic techniques to reflect this experience. Since the second part of The Invention of Solitude, Auster has been fond of utilizing direct allusions to his
literary forbears. To cite just a few examples: Daniel Quinn’s pen name in *City of Glass* is William Wilson, which is the name of an Edgar Allan Poe story of 1839 about a case of doubled identity. Both *Leviathan* (1992) and *The Brooklyn Follies* are presided over by the spirit of Henry David Thoreau. *The Book of Illusions* (2002) expands and updates Nathaniel Hawthorne’s tale “The Birth-mark” (1843). One could argue that such allusiveness makes the work “too obsessively literary.” However, it can also be viewed as recognition that stories, like identities, are created collectively, that there is a community of storytellers transcending individual authority and historical eras.

Originality, in consequence, is never achievable in any pristine manner, only in the way a writer refocuses and reapplies a story to a new context. If this would seem to undermine the writer’s authority, then Auster is always willing to allow this to happen. Another way of doing this is to dissolve the barrier between writer and character, biography and fiction. From the moment Daniel Quinn, in *City of Glass*, receives a series of phone calls from a stranger asking for “Paul Auster” (7), Auster enthusiastically inserts himself into his work. Sometimes he appears in anagrammatical form, as the writer John Trause in *Oracle Night*; sometimes pseudonymously, as Paul Benjamin in *Smoke* (Benjamin being Auster’s middle name); and sometimes as a vague memory: “a guy named Anster, Omster, something like that.”

Moreover, Auster has always used autobiographical elements in his fiction. *Leviathan* is a supreme example of this tendency. The narrator, Peter Aaron, shares initials with Paul Auster, falls in love at first sight with a woman named Iris (Auster’s wife is Siri), and has a writing retreat in Vermont, like Auster. Despite inviting dismissal as, in one critic’s words, “intellectual gamesmanship,” it should first be noted that many other writers (such
as Philip Roth) indulge in such biographical teasing. Second, if Auster takes it to extremes, it serves as consolidation of the idea that “real” lives are the sum of the multiple stories told about them, and therefore lack an objective, authoritative center.

Another formal symptom of this lack is the characteristic Russian-doll construction of Auster’s narratives. Auster is fond of building layer upon layer of narration to the extent that an inattentive reader might forget which character is actually speaking. For some critics, the technique becomes wearisome. D. T. Max asks, “At one point in The Book of Illusions Auster narrates Zimmer narrating Mann narrating Frost narrating his story. What are we to make of this?” One might respond that readerly frustration is part of the point. Rejection of the traditional, omniscient narrator in favor of this multivocal approach is a more accurate reflection of how one’s clamorous reality is textured, and it can indeed be frustrating for those who seek definitive answers. An Auster reader, like his characters, must learn not to seek them.

Life will always remain resistant to the imposition of order. In fact for Auster life’s only certainty is chance. His narratives invariably contain outrageous coincidences, chance meetings, seemingly impossible connections. An underlying tension in his work is that an artist is someone who creates an ordered universe, yet has a responsibility to incorporate random incidents. In such a structured environment, however, nothing is ever truly random. “From an aesthetic point of view, the introduction of chance elements in fiction probably creates as many problems as it solves. I’ve come in for a lot of abuse from critics because of it,” Auster admits. Yet chance cannot be avoided: “In the strictest sense of the word, I consider myself a realist. Chance is a part of reality: we are continually shaped by the forces of
What I am after, I suppose, is to write fiction as strange as the world I live in” (AH 287–88). The problem for some of Auster’s characters is that they cannot accept the unexpected, and instead succumb to a belief that every single event happens for a reason and specifically implicates them. Part of Auster’s project is to repudiate this notion.

The ultimate in meaningless occurrences is death itself. When Auster was fourteen, he witnessed a friend being struck dead by lightning only yards in front of him. After the tragedy, he speculated on his own proximity to death and declared, “Life would never feel the same to me again.”21 This ethical and aesthetic epiphany is repeated when his father passes away. The Invention of Solitude stems from “death without warning” (IOS 5). (It was also, as Auster has admitted, made possible by the inheritance he received when his father died.) Death, in other words, is frequently the inspiration for creativity. The end becomes the beginning.

All of Auster’s concerns, including the meaninglessness of death, can be viewed through the prism of his Jewish background. His grandparents, Anna and Harry, were Jews from Stanislav in present-day Lithuania who emigrated to the States in the late nineteenth century. Like many of his generation, he considers himself “Americanized”: he was “brought up as an American boy, who knew less about my ancestors than I did about Hopalong Cassidy’s hat” (IOS 28). Nonetheless, there are important ways in which his work has a recognizably Jewish sensibility. Unlike Philip Roth, say, Auster rarely tackles overtly “Jewish” themes: it is more a question of aesthetic practice. Reference is made to the Holocaust in Oracle Night (2003), for example, and Auster has stated that In the Country of Last Things (1987) allegorizes the Warsaw ghetto (AH 321), yet neither is
made the explicit theme. Instead, they function as cataclysmic
events that summon the writer to deal with them, but constantly
frustrate his efforts because their sheer magnitude and horror
expose the redundancy of language. The gap between reality and
the possible representation of that reality widens when one takes
into account Jewish historical experience.

What results is something the author dubs “exile.” This is, for
the Jewish American writer, not simply a condition of outsider-
ness; it is a complex state of being both inside and outside simulta-
taneously. In his essay on Charles Reznikoff called “The Decisive
Moment,” Auster articulates this state: “Reznikoff’s poems are
what Reznikoff is: the poems of an American Jew, or, if you will,
of a hyphenated American, a Jewish-American, with the two
terms standing not so much on equal footing as combining to
form a third and wholly different term: the condition of being
in two places at the same time, or, quite simply, the condition of
being nowhere” (AH 44). This is Auster’s condition: it explains
his ambivalence over national and literary identity. His tendency
to mine his Jewish familial and literary heritage in texts like The
Invention of Solitude is combined with a fascination for Ameri-
can mythologies such as the Wild West. Similarly, Auster bal-
ances the numerous references to nineteenth-century American
writers with allusions to European antecedents such as Franz
Kafka. Being nowhere is the artist’s condition, because the art-
ist is both involved in and distant from the event he or she de-
scribes, as well as being alienated from the language he or she
employs—hence the Russian-doll narrative form already alluded
to: stories are constructed like parables, in Hebrew mishral, with
the final cohesive lesson, the nimsbal, missing in the layers of nar-
ration. The reader, then, finds himself or herself exiled from any
definitive meaning. And finally, being nowhere is the condition
of many of Auster’s itinerant and homeless protagonists (for example, Walter Rawley in *Mr. Vertigo* [1994]): perpetual movement, the sense that one is only at home when mobile, stems from a Jewish inheritance of dispersion and exile.

Thus there is an endless oscillation in Auster’s work between confinement (in locked rooms or the author’s own psyche) and freedom in open spaces (western landscapes or the streets of Brooklyn). Of course, the two are not mutually exclusive: an individual can be as free in his or her mind and soul as any wanderer if he or she chooses to acknowledge the plurality of others’ experience.

It is intriguing, however, to speculate on Auster’s next move. His previous two novels were markedly contrasting. *The Brooklyn Follies* takes Auster out of his customary locked room and into a thriving community. It is in many ways the most open and generous of all his works, despite ending on 11 September 2001. *Travels in the Scriptorium* (2006), on the other hand, takes place metaphorically within the writer’s head. An aging author, Mr. Blank, wakes up inside a room with no recollection of his arrival and where, periodically, he is visited by characters from his books. The novel got a hostile critical reception. Angel Gurria-Quintana, for example, dismisses it as “self-indulgent” and “an elaborate in-joke.” It seems that Auster’s future reputation depends on his willingness to step outside into the world once more. *Man in the Dark* (2008), his latest, may offer a suitable compromise. Despite taking place largely within the head of another aging writer, August Brill, it paints its stories on a broader historical canvas, offering a vision of an alternative America that descends into civil war after the 2000 election. At once inward and outward looking, it marks at least a tentative step into new political territories.